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DEPT FOR NEA/ARP JOSHUA HARRIS AND JEREMY BERNDT

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [KIRF](#) [PHUM](#) [SA](#) [YM](#)  
SUBJECT: NAJRAN'S NEW GOVERNOR OFF TO GOOD START BUT CHALLENGED BY  
NORTHERN YEMEN CONFLICT

REF: RIYADH 482

DHAHRAN 00000258 001.2 OF 002

CLASSIFIED BY: Joseph A. Kenny, Consul General, EXEC, DOS.  
REASON: 1.4 (b), (d)  
SUMMARY

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¶1. (C) The new governor of Najran province on the border with Yemen is viewed as being a serious, business-oriented leader looking to downplay the sectarian differences between the officially recognized Sunni interpretation of Islam and that of the province's majority Ismaili (specifically Sulaimani Bohra branch) residents. However, the intensifying conflict in Northern Yemen has had some spillover effects into the region, including wounded Huthis being treated in Najrani hospitals, Yemeni citizens begging in the streets, and the sounds of firearms and explosions in the distance. END SUMMARY.

NEW GOVERNOR OF NAJRAN

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¶2. (C) On March 27 King Abdullah appointed his son Prince Mishal bin Abdullah bin Abdulaziz as the new governor of Najran province (see reftel for more info on the appointment). The population of Najran according to a 2004 census is about 420,000 with Saudi citizens making up approximately 350,000 of the total. The vast majority of the residents belong to the Sulaimani Bohra branch of Ismaili Shiism. The last governor was relieved of his duties in large part due to his inability to quell the discontent among the Ismailis in Najran. With rising violence across the border in Yemen as well as increasing tensions between the Yemeni and Saudi governments, a secure and stable Najran is all the more critical to the Kingdom.

INFLUENTIAL ISMAILI BUSINESSMAN

IS CLOSE TO NAJRAN GOVERNOR

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13. (C/NF) In an October 7 meeting with the Consul General and PolOffs, Ali Borman al-Yami (protect), an influential Ismaili businessman originally from Najran, described his close relationship with the new governor and the prince's priorities for the province. Al-Yami has direct access to the governor and is collaborating with him in the establishment of a Najran-based holding company. (NOTE: Al-Yami is a well-established contact of the Consulate living in the Eastern Province and a successful businessman in the region. His credibility as a well-connected source was bolstered when he accurately predicted that Prince Mishal bin Abdullah would become the governor of Najran several months before the announcement. END NOTE.)

THE GOVERNOR FOCUSES ON BUSINESS COMMUNITY,  
DOWNPLAYS SECTARIAN DIFFERENCES

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14. (C/NF) Al-Yami (protect) described Prince Mishal as an improvement over his predecessor, Prince Mishal bin Saud bin Abdulaziz, who ruled during a time of rapid deterioration in the relationship between the majority Ismaili residents and the provincial authorities. Al-Yami said that the current governor has downplayed controversial sectarian rhetoric or policies going as far as praying alongside Ismailis at his mosque. Instead he has focused his efforts on areas of common interest, namely fostering business growth in the province. According to al-Yami, this has made the governor popular in Najran and he is generally well-respected among the Ismailis. The Governor spearheaded festive celebrations on the occasion of Saudi National Day (September 23) that included musical performances. When challenged by the Mutawaeen, he suggested that they take a holiday away from Najran! According to Al-Yami, the Governor is improving the quality of life for the Najran people, building

DHAHRAN 00000258 002.2 OF 002

the infrastructure, including hospitals, a sports center, etc.

15. (C/NF) According to al-Yami (protect) 90 percent of Najran's Saudi population follows the Sulaimani Bohra sub-sect of Ismailism. (NOTE: Historically, the Sulaimani Bohra branch of Ismailism broke off into their own sub-sect in the sixteenth century. The Sulaimani reside largely in northern Yemen and bordering areas of Saudi Arabia, specifically Najran. Al-Yami made a point of distinguishing his people as Sulaimani (not Ismaili), indicating a hint of disdain for being referred to as the latter. END NOTE.) Al-Yami noted that traditional Ismaili mosques are tolerated in Najran and that Ismailis generally are allowed to practice their faith as they see fit, especially since the current governor took power.

BONDS BETWEEN YEMEN AND NAJRAN ARE DEEP

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16. (C/NF) Aside from the religious ties among the Sulaimanis living on both sides of the Najrani, Saudi-Yemeni border, al-Yami described deep tribal links between southern Saudi provinces of Najran and Jizan and northern Yemen. For example, Saudi tribal leaders have the authority to grant temporary "visas" without MFA or MOI approval to Yemenis based on requests from Yemeni tribal leaders. He also said that tribal leaders on both sides of the border regularly meet and discuss tribal matters. Cross-border commercial ties are also strong with special coins used as currency among merchants within Najran as

well as in Yemen.

#### CONFLICT IN YEMEN FELT IN NAJRAN

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¶17. (C/NF) When asked about the impact that the Yemeni conflict is having in Najran, al-Yami said that injured Huthis were being treated in Najrani hospitals. He also said that people in Najran and Jizan have at times heard the sound of gunfire and explosives in the distance. However, he was adamant that the violence would not spill over into any Saudi population centers, stating that there was a "red line" which could not be crossed, though he did not provide any further details on the subject. He concluded his comments on the subject by declaring that Yemen will eventually divide since the north is so much different from the south. He alluded to the fact that the south was much more orderly and business oriented.

#### COMMENT

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¶18. (C/NF) Though al-Yami represents merely one perspective on recent events in Najran, he provides a particularly well-informed, objective snapshot of the province. It appears that the governor has made substantial progress in making amends with the Ismaili population, which will allow him to focus on securing Najran from potentially destabilizing effects of the Yemeni conflict. Nevertheless, the deeply rooted links between Yemen and Najran will ensure that this sparsely populated southern province remains a critical junction between KSA and Yemen.

KENNY